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# **‘The sermons in the stones of Germany preach nihilism’: ‘Outsider rubble literature’ and the reconstruction of Germany, 1945-1949**

**LARA FEIGEL**

**Abstract:** This article explores the literature and film produced by the writers and filmmakers sent by the British and Americans to occupied Germany in the four years after the war. Although these figures were intended to help transform the mentality of the Germans, it is argued here that they had less effect on Germany than Germany had on them and that the crucial (albeit unwitting) result of their visits to Germany was the creation of a genre of art here named ‘outsider rubble literature’ or *Fremdentrümmerliteratur*. This is a genre that asked, ultimately, what right the Allies had to judge Germany from outside when they were guilty too. It comprises a series of fundamentally ambivalent works of art that often manifest their ambivalence by juxtaposing the two forms of destruction experienced in Germany: the destruction of the bombed cities and the destruction wrought in the concentration camps. The article suggests that this genre of ‘outsider rubble literature’ includes Thomas Mann’s great postwar novel *Doktor Faustus*, arguing that our understanding of this novel is increased if we read it alongside the postwar writing of Stephen Spender, Martha Gellhorn and Klaus Mann and the postwar filmmaking of Billy Wilder.

In July 1945 the British poet Stephen Spender arrived in Germany, tasked with assessing the intellectual climate of the universities and hoping to help enable the spiritual reconstruction of the country he had loved in his youth. Although he was well-informed about the bombing of the German cities, he was astonished to encounter mile after mile of rubble. Spender was sure that the devastation was too great ever to be healed. Where in London the surrounding life of the

people filled up the gaps and wounds left by the bombing, in Hamburg and Cologne the inhabitants became parasites sucking at a dead carcass as they dug among the rubbish for food.

For Spender, the rubble spoke eloquently about mid-twentieth-century civilization. In his published account of a visit to Cologne, he reflected that the destruction was serious in several senses:

It is a climax of deliberate effort, an achievement of our civilization, the most striking result of co-operation between nations in the twentieth century. It is the shape created by our century as the Gothic cathedral is the shape created by the Middle Ages... The sermons in the stones of Germany preach nihilism.<sup>i</sup>

Here Spender performed the dexterous feat of locating meaning specifically in meaninglessness. This nonsensical rubble was fitting as the architectural achievement of his times. Effectively, Spender was identifying the German ruins as the physical manifestation of a collective European fall from grace. Crucially, he implicated all the nations involved in the war in this fall, taking on a portion of the guilt himself.

In this respect, Spender's interpretation of the German destruction was very different from his government's. Officially, Britain and Germany were still at war and the British military occupiers insisted that the nation had brought this wreckage on itself. But Spender could not observe Germany as a detached outsider. He looked back on his years in Germany in his early twenties as his real education. Having failed to take his degree at Oxford, he had been educated in the beer halls of Bonn by the German critic Ernst Robert Curtius. It was impossible for him to encounter the destruction neutrally; impossible to look back on summer evenings dancing in the half light without seeing that he too had been seduced by a vision of physical strength and youth that was inseparable from Nazism.<sup>ii</sup>

Spender was one of many writers and filmmakers with torn loyalties brought back to Germany as journalists reporting on the war or the Nuremberg trials or sent in by the British and American occupiers to help govern their zones of Occupation. Initially, the Occupation authorities were simply looking for German speakers, and these were likely to be writers or artists. As the Occupation was established, both governments were also looking for people who

would be able to revive culture in Germany and to revive it specifically in order to showcase the culture of the democratic world. At its simplest, the hope was that by presenting the Germans with British and American books and films, the occupiers could demonstrate the virtues of a peaceful and democratic way of life. They also became increasingly concerned to create a flourishing cultural scene in order to compete with the Russians, who had revived culture in their zone of Germany with startling alacrity. As a result they sent in not only German-speaking Brits and Americans but also the German themselves: anti-Nazi exiles now naturalized as British or American citizens and wearing the uniform of the occupiers.

It is not surprising that these writers and filmmakers should have experienced the destruction ambivalently. Almost all the British and American occupiers found that the sight of starving people scavenging in the debris of their bombed homes moved them to pity, even if this was accompanied by a vision of the destruction wrought by the Germans in the concentration camps. Indeed, for many of the writers and filmmakers who were sent to Germany from Britain and America, it was precisely the tension between these two visions that came to characterize the complexity of the German situation. The sight both of the rubble cities and the concentration camps is present as a shocking, visceral experience in most of the poetry, novels, films and reportage created by outsiders encountering Germany in this period, whether those outsiders were British and Americans by birth or were German exiles now naturalized as British or American citizens.

Here I will argue that collectively these ambivalent portraits of Germany in the immediate postwar years constitute a genre of 'outsider rubble literature', related to but also separate from the *Trümmerliteratur* (rubble literature) produced by the Germans themselves, which dominated the artistic landscape of Germany in the 1940s. This is a genre that explores questions of guilt, atonement and redemption against a background of apocalyptic ruin and that includes works as diverse as Spender's meditative reportage in *European Witness*, W.H. Auden's allegorical poem 'Memorial for the City', Martha Gellhorn's novel *Point of No Return*, Klaus Mann's unfinished novel *The Last Day*, Billy Wilder's triumphantly comic film *A Foreign Affair* and Humphrey Jennings's

documentary *A Defeated People*.<sup>iii</sup> All of these works used the concrete landscape of the bombed cities, the concentration camps or the fallen pomp of the Third Reich to explore more metaphysical questions of guilt. Surveying Germany from the perspective of an outsider, these artists saw in Germany's tragedy the larger tragedy of the human condition.

I am suggesting here that this genre of art is an incidental achievement of the Occupation. In sending in writers and filmmakers, the British and Americans hoped in part to transform the mentality of the Germans. In fact, the artists sent to Germany had very little effect on Germany. They did not succeed in turning the majority of Germans into peace-loving people who renounced their own past. A survey conducted in West Germany in 1951 revealed that only 5 per cent of the participating Germans admitted feeling any guilt towards the Jews, while 21 per cent believed that 'the Jews themselves were partly responsible for what happened to them during the Third Reich'.<sup>iv</sup> But if these cultural ambassadors had little effect on Germany, then Germany nonetheless had considerable effect on them. And the result of their experiences was this genre that we might call *Fremdentrümmerliteratur*.

This was a genre that asked, ultimately, what right the Allies had to judge Germany from outside when they were guilty too. Surely they shared the responsibility for Germany's crimes because they had allowed them to happen? The Allies had condoned Hitler's initial aggression and then, during the war, had fought to win rather than to prevent inhumanity, failing to free Jews in the territories they liberated or to exploit their knowledge of what was happening to the Jews to influence world opinion about the Nazis. 'The victors who seat us on the defendants' bench must sit next to us. There is room,' the German writer Erich Kästner observed in his diary on 8 May 1945.<sup>v</sup>

I would like to suggest that this genre of 'outsider rubble literature' includes Thomas Mann's great postwar novel *Doktor Faustus*, which was the only one of the works explored here to have a significant impact in Germany. This is a book written by a man who had not seen the ruins he described, but who had heard about them from his children Klaus, Erika and Golo (all sent into Germany in American military uniform) and had been called to make pronouncements to Germany as an American throughout the war. He now imaginatively recreated

the German ruins from California in frightening detail. It is a novel that takes on new resonance and becomes more movingly confessional when read alongside *Point of No Return* or *A Foreign Affair* because Mann's troubled distance from the scenes he describes becomes the central emotion of his book.

Mann, like many of the writers and filmmakers considered here, tried and failed in the years after the war to mediate between the occupiers and the Germans, attempting to transform postwar German culture. But he, like Spender and Gellhorn, created a work of art that performed such an act of mediation by investigating the symbolism of the rubble and of the hungry figures who populated it from the perspective of an outsider who was nonetheless intimately and uncomfortably connected to it; unable to disassociate himself from its implications and conscious of the many directions in which guilt could be apportioned.

The genre of outsider literature rubble literature and film that I am proposing here is vast. It merits detailed study, especially as I am suggesting that all these works look different when considered in relation to each other. It also merits comparison with indigenous rubble literature. Here there is space only for a brief examination of a handful of outsider texts and films. Specifically, I am exploring the ambivalence manifested in a series of works of art that oscillate between intimacy and distance, pity and blame, identification and alienation. This enables me to bring the postwar works of the German and Austrian exiles Thomas and Klaus Mann and Billy Wilder into the same frame as those of the British and American writers Stephen Spender and Martha Gellhorn. Though all these figures were in Germany for very different reasons, taken together they engaged in a collective exploration of what possible response there could be to the tragic spectacle of absolute destruction in a nation that must take some of the responsibility for that destruction on itself.

## **OUTSIDERS LOOKING IN**

For Spender and Gellhorn there were two kinds of destruction and consequently two kinds of guilt in Germany. Early on in *European Witness* Spender interviews

an interpreter who tells him that 'some Jews' had to be 'put away, locked up, because they sought to destroy the unity of the German *Glaubensbewegung*' (p. 44). Spender then goes straight on to recount a conversation with a concentration camp inmate who describes being left in a cellar that is constantly filled with water he has to pump out with a handle in order to save himself from being drowned (p. 48).

Spender struggles to reconcile the ruins in the bombed cities with the destruction brought about inside the camps. His horror at the total devastation he has witnessed in Cologne is such that he cannot bear some form of salvation not to be possible in Germany. If the rubble in the bombed cities is Europe's tragedy then Europe can only be redeemed if Germany itself proves capable of redemption.

For Spender, the possibility of German renewal was doubly important because his own youth had burned alongside the buildings in Berlin, Hamburg and Bonn. Before leaving for Germany, he had authoritatively told the British authorities that he wished to seek out the 'good' Germans who might be able to start a new artistic movement in Germany after the war. Once he was there, he was frightened to find that people like his mentor E. R. Curtius had been unexpectedly passive in resisting Nazism. Spender blamed Curtius for not resisting partly because if Germany as a whole had proved culpable in its lack of resistance to Hitler then it rendered Spender's own youth in Germany a lie and potentially made Spender himself complicit, through his wartime loyalty to his mentor.

It seems to be this anxiety that prompts a period of depression recounted in a chapter of *European Witness* entitled 'Nausea'. Here he describes a feeling of 'violent homesickness accompanied by a sensation of panic that I would never get out of Germany' (p. 61). He believes that the Germans have 'deprived first themselves and then Europe of freedom' and that as a result Germany has become a ruined prison in which the occupiers are the gaolers (p. 62). This leaves him frightened that the ruins of Germany could become the ruins of the whole of Europe.

Spender is able to offer an alternative to this nausea. He suggests hopefully that the Occupation authorities need find only ten responsible

Germans to initiate a new, democratic German regime. He also advocates that reconstructed Germany should become part of a new mode of pan-European alliance that will eliminate nationalism and enable Europe to think both collectively and culturally, preventing the kind of ruin he fears. However his book ends not with this sensible vision of reconstruction but with a vision of despair. He describes how the Nazis have preoccupied not only his waking thoughts but his dreams for many years:

And in my dreams, I did not simply hate them and put them from me. I argued with them, I wrestled with their spirits, and the scene in which I knew them was one in which my own blood and tears flowed. The cities and soil of Germany where they were sacrificed were not just places of material destruction. They were altars on which a solemn sacrifice had been performed according to a ritual in which inevitably all the nations took part. The whole world had seemed to be darkened with their darkness. (p. 241)

For Spender, despite his hope for a new Europe, the darkness remained. The nightmare waited to engulf the Germans and their occupiers alike. The battle against darkness he describes is an existential battle in which he is as implicated as the Germans. Neither he nor the reader is easily convinced when he adds a final sentence in a lighter, more practical tone, suggesting that in fact this darkness may be possible to overcome:

And at the same time, there could not be the least doubt that the only answer to this past and this present is a conscious, deliberate and wholly responsible determination to make our society walk in paths of light. (p. 241)

Spender was not alone in responding to Germany with nausea and despair. And unlike Spender, Martha Gellhorn could not envisage an alternative to the darkness. Gellhorn had arrived in Germany a few months earlier than Spender, reporting on bomb damage in Cologne and on the liberation of Dachau in the spring of 1945. She remained there for several months and then returned a year later to witness the end of the Nuremberg tribunal, which had put 21 of the National Socialist leaders in the dock. During this period Gellhorn came to feel fury towards the Germans, antagonized by the apparently guilt-free sycophancy she had witnessed in the bombed cities and then goaded to rage by all that she saw in Dachau. Yet she remained ambivalent because like Spender she partly blamed both herself and her country for the destruction she saw



around her. In an article written just after the Nuremberg trial had finished, Gellhorn reminded her readers that guilt could not be laid at the door of the Nazi leaders alone. Describing the tribunal's charge of 'crimes against peace', she asserted that war itself was the ultimate crime:

War is the silver bombers, with the young men in them, who never wanted to kill anyone, flying in the morning sun over Germany and not coming back... And its heritage is what we have now, this maimed and tormented world which we must somehow restore.<sup>vi</sup>

There is little hope here that the maimed and tormented world will prove capable of restoration. And there is even less hope in the novel that she was writing at the time.

*Point of No Return* juxtaposes the destruction of the German cities and the destruction wrought by the Germans in the camps more explicitly than Spender's book does. It also both tempers the need to pity the Germans and makes any pity the characters do display more surprising by viewing Germany through the eyes of two war-hardened American soldiers, Lieutenant Colonel John Dawson Smithers and his Jewish driver Jacob Levy, who arrive in Germany in early April 1945. They are greeted by a country 'coming apart before their eyes'.<sup>vii</sup> But any pity for its scrawny inhabitants is almost immediately prevented by the sight of a stretch of verdant farms, bursting with chickens and geese. Smithers wonders why the Germans felt the need to start a war. 'You could have understood the war better if Germany had been a lousy starving ugly country, as imagined' (p. 231).

The Regiment then rides into an imaginary bombed medieval town called Hildenwald. When traversed by jeep, Hildenwald provides an experience that is likened to a rollercoaster: 'you climbed up and down over mountains of rubble' (p. 231). This is a city where ordinary life has become impossible. There are rows of housefronts with nothing behind them but holes. However, any perplexed sympathy Jacob Levy feels for the Germans in the bombed cities is eliminated when he visits Dachau. Before he visits the camp, Levy does not understand why the US is in the war in the first place, or why the Jews did not 'clear out of this stinking Europe long ago?' (p. 104) At Dachau, he observes 'the krauts all leaning over their front gates and gossiping together in the sun', and

assumes that the place cannot be that bad (p. 269). But entering the gates, he is confronted immediately with the stench of decay. He sees the bald, lice-covered inmates walking aimlessly, their eyes looking ahead 'too big, black and empty', and is paralyzed with fear (p. 206).

Leaving the camp, Levy feels he has no other life and no other knowledge: 'he knew that he could not live anywhere now because in his mind, slyly, there was nothing but horror' (p. 213). He is struck most of all by the scale of his own willful ignorance. 'I never knew; I thought those goddam krauts had to fight like we did' (p. 219). He is angry with himself for denying his own Jewishness; for fighting in the war without identifying himself with Hitler's victims. And he is furious with the Germans who have looked on while thousands of their countrymen died.

Returning to his jeep, Levy drives back up the cheerful street that leads to the camp. Two men tip their hats at each other; a woman calls to her child who arrives with pig-tails bouncing. They do not seem to notice the American soldier driving his jeep erratically along the street (p. 291). Levy approaches a group of people and honks his horn to encourage them to move. They fail to do so and the sight of their proud, strong bodies and 'grinning pink faces' moves him to fury. 'They didn't have to move for anyone. They'd gotten away with it.' Hate explodes in Levy's brain and he can feel himself sliding and slipping. It is hard to breathe and he presses his foot to the floor. 'At sixty miles an hour, Jacob Levy drove his jeep on to the laughing Germans.' (p. 292)

Here Levy kills the Germans and dooms himself in a single act. This is simultaneously an act of murder and suicide and as such is a response to two forms of guilt. He is punishing the Germans for perpetrating the crimes in the camps and punishing himself for standing by as a Jew. After visiting Dachau Gellhorn, who was considerably better informed than Levy, expressed disbelief at her own ignorance. 'I did not know, realize, find out, care, understand what was happening,' she wrote in a letter.<sup>viii</sup> By making Levy a Jew she makes his ignorance more culpable. He has less chance than Spender to escape nihilism.

## **INSIDERS OBSERVING FROM OUTSIDE**

In the spring of 1945, the novelist Klaus Mann and filmmaker Billy Wilder returned to Germany. Of Austrian origin, Billy Wilder had made his name in 1920s Berlin, before the National Socialists drove him to America. Now he was tasked with reconstructing the film industry in the American zone of Germany. He was determined to resist sympathizing with the Germans and was interested chiefly in attempting to locate his mother and grandmother who, as Jews, had been put in concentration camps. Klaus Mann had joined the American army a couple of years earlier, wishing to do all he could to aid his new nation in defeating Nazism. He was in Germany reporting for the US forces newspaper and carefully maintained an American accent, wishing like Wilder to make his distance from his former compatriots explicit.

At the same time, Klaus Mann's father Thomas Mann was broadcasting to Germany from California. He lamented that as the bells of victory boomed, he and his compatriots had to lower their heads in shame. Two weeks later he elaborated on this in a lecture at the US Library of Congress on 'Germany and the Germans' where he both emphasized his American citizenship and insisted that he remained a German. It would be dishonest to commend himself as 'the good Germany' in contrast to the wicked, guilty Germany over there. He had been nurtured in the provincial cosmopolitanism of the old German world; he had felt in himself the potential for fanaticism that this entailed.<sup>ix</sup>

Over the next four years, both Klaus and Thomas Mann would write novels responding to the destruction in Germany with torn feelings, dramatising the uneasy status as neither outsiders nor insiders in their former homeland that was brought about by the Occupation. Wilder would meanwhile make his great postwar film *A Foreign Affair*, in which he learnt to laugh at the tragic situation in Germany.

Mann's *Doktor Faustus* was published in German (in Switzerland) in 1947 and in English (in America) the following year. It is the great novel to come out of Germany in the years immediately after the war but at the same time, written by an American citizen with no first-hand experience of the ruins he portrayed, it is also arguably the greatest example of 'outsider rubble literature'. From California, Mann revealed himself to be at once a German and an outsider, able to

diagnose the Germans' guilt and despair with a clarity possible to few in Germany but unable to separate himself from the tragedy. The book takes as its starting point a suggestion made in the 'Germany and the Germans' lecture that both Germany and its inhabitants have made a pact with the Devil and that as a great German artist seduced by German Romanticism, Mann himself was fully implicated in Germany's guilt.

*Doktor Faustus* relates the simultaneous and intertwined downfalls of its tragic artist hero and his tragic nation. Though he was now an outsider to Germany himself, Mann chose to write from the perspective of an insider. The narrator Serenus Zeitblom is a so-called 'inner emigrant' teacher who now tells the story of the life and times of the avant-garde composer Adrian Leverkühn.<sup>x</sup> Zeitblom has loved Leverkühn loyally since they played together as children, even after finding that as a young man Leverkühn made a strange pact with the Devil, sacrificing personal happiness for artistic inspiration. In Goethe's version of the story, Faust sacrifices happiness for knowledge, promising Mephistopheles: 'If ever I shall tell the moment: Bide here you are so beautiful!' that he can damn him instantly.<sup>xi</sup> Mann's hero makes a similar pact, acquiescing to the Devil's demand that he live without love. Both Faust and Leverkühn make the pledge willingly because they are already unhappy. 'Is not coldness a precedence with you,' the Devil says to Leverkühn. The tragedy is that there will now be no possibility of happy escape.<sup>xii</sup>

Leverkühn's damnation comes in the form of syphilis. Like Nietzsche, one of Mann's many models for his character, Leverkühn experiences the disease as creatively fertile but then loses his mind.<sup>xiii</sup> He engages in a dialogue with the Devil who claims the illness as his own and warns Leverkühn that he will be unable to love: 'your life shall be cold' (p. 264).<sup>xiv</sup> This prediction proves painfully true. And what the Devil has not made explicit is that should Leverkühn try to thwart the curse, he will doom those he loves to a hasty death. 'I have discovered that it ought not be,' Leverkühn tells Zeitblom after his beloved nephew's death, 'what people call human... It will be taken back' (p. 501).<sup>xv</sup> Instead he channels all his energy into his final masterpiece. For years Leverkühn has been pushing music towards abstraction, going beyond tonality in an attempt to emancipate dissonance from resolution. Now his late great symphonic cantata *The*

*Lamentation of Doctor Faustus* uses a mournful dissonant echo to create an ode to sorrow as a counterpart to Beethoven's ode to joy.

In 1930 Leverkühn assembles his friends to confess his pact with the Devil (which most of them see as an allegorical joke) and to play his new piece. He collapses at the piano, falling into a coma from which he recovers physically but not mentally. Zeitblom cannot be sure if Leverkühn is actually in league with Satan. But he is aware that the question is irrelevant. Mann presents it as inevitable that Leverkühn should succumb to the Devil because the composer has been seduced by the demonic for years. The Devil has always been present in Leverkühn's satanic 'mildly orgiastic' laughter, which Zeitblom found disconcerting in their youth (p. 94).<sup>xvi</sup> Leverkühn is a genius and Zeitblom observes that there is always a 'faint, sinister connection' between genius and the nether world (p. 6).<sup>xvii</sup> He is a musician and music is inherently devilish, belonging to 'a world of spirits' (p. 11).<sup>xviii</sup>

So too, Leverkühn is caught up on the same demonic tide as Nazism. He sees Zeitblom's humanism as outmoded, committing instead to a mixture of nihilism and barbaric primitivism. 'You will break through the age itself... and dare a barbarism,' the Devil says to him (p. 259).<sup>xix</sup> The phrase 'break through' is telling. Later in the novel Germany has a *Durchbruch* ('breakthrough') to world power under Hitler, while Nazi supporters see war as the way Germany will 'break through (*durchbrechen*) to a new form of life in which state and culture would be one' (p. 317).<sup>xx</sup> The Nazis may ban Leverkühn's works for their experimental dissonance but Leverkühn is a kindred spirit. More explicitly than Stephen Spender, Mann is suggesting here as he had in his lecture that German culture was fundamentally receptive to Nazism. And like Spender, Mann saw Germany as half deserving the destruction that he now lyrically mourned.

As in Mann's 1945 lecture, the Germany of *Doktor Faustus* has made a pact with the Devil and it is now paying the price, as its cities are destroyed from the air. This devilish act, Zeitblom says, 'would scream to the heavens were not we who suffer it ourselves laden with guilt' (p. 184).<sup>xxi</sup> Zeitblom is convinced that the Germans deserve this apocalyptic justice even as he laments the passing of a world he once loved.

Since starting the book in 1943, Mann had followed news of the war obsessively, imagining day by day the destruction of the cities he had once loved. His diary from the war years charts the raids over Germany alongside his progress with his book. 'Berlin's agony, no coal, no electricity'; 'Heavy bombing of Germany... The cities fall like ripe plums'; 'the failure of the novel is beyond doubt now.'<sup>xxii</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that Zeitblom's sorrow at the destruction of Germany echoes Mann's. Zeitblom begins the book on 23 May 1943 (the day that Mann himself began to write) from a hideaway in Freising on the Isar, just outside Munich. On 14 March 1945 Mann recorded receiving news from his son Klaus about the destruction of their Munich house, noting a 'strange impression' in his diary. That day he was engaged in writing chapter twenty-six, where Zeitblom reports that 'the terror of the almost daily air raids on our nicely encircled Fortress Europe increases to dimensions beyond conceiving... more and more of our cities collapse in ruin' (p. 267).<sup>xxiii</sup>

In his hermit's cell on the Isar, Zeitblom recoils from 'our hideously battered Munich', with its toppled statues, its facades 'that gaze from vacant eye sockets to disguise the yawning void beyond' (p. 474).<sup>xxiv</sup> This was a landscape that Mann had not seen and had no intention of seeing in the near future. But he had read about it in the newspapers and in the anguished reports from his children, who had returned as occupiers; it haunted his dreams and his diary and now became eerily tangible in his novel.

In California, Mann had hoped publicly and to a large extent privately that Germany would lose the war. Like Spender in *European Witness* he saw the destruction of the German cities both as tragically necessary and as the supreme achievement of his age. He reminded his readers of America's superior military prowess in his novel, voicing Zeitblom's ironic surprise that 'enfeebled democracies do indeed know how to use these dreadful tools' and that war is not after all 'a German prerogative' (p. 268).<sup>xxv</sup> But the prospect of another shameful German defeat had also filled Mann with secret horror that he expressed through Zeitblom, who admits that he 'cannot help fearing it more than anything else in the world' (p. 33).<sup>xxvi</sup> Zeitblom never quite allows himself to hope for either defeat or victory. He is pleased when the Germans invent a new kind of torpedo,

feeling 'a certain satisfaction at our ever resourceful spirit of invention', even if it is used in the service of a regime that has led them into a war aimed at creating a terrifying 'and as the world sees it, so it would seem, quite intolerable reality of a German Europe' (p. 183).<sup>xxvii</sup>

Through Zeitblom, Mann turns the Germans into a nation of tragic heroes; good people grappling with impossible paradoxes whose current mental state 'weighs more heavily upon them than it would upon any other, hopelessly estranging them from themselves' (p. 34?).<sup>xxviii</sup> If Zeitblom's sons knew that he secretly possessed Leverkühn's private papers, they would denounce him, but they would be horrified by their own act. Mann once described Zeitblom as 'a parody of myself'.<sup>xxix</sup> Through Zeitblom he was ironising the German tendency to see their conflicts of conscience as unusually noble and profound. Zeitblom does not always perceive how much he displays the vices of his nation. He shares his intellectual compatriots' cultural elitism and fear of the masses; like his creator he participated in the 'popular elation' at the start of the First World War, (p. 317). He is too foolish not to be mocked for asserting that the German 'soul is powerfully tragic', that 'our love belongs to fate... even a doom that sets the heavens afire with the red twilight of the gods' (p. 185).<sup>xxx</sup> But even as he mocked his own tale, Mann allowed it to take on full tragic force and implicated himself in the tragedy; like Zeitblom he ultimately shared Leverkühn's belief in the redemptive power of art, believing too both that art mattered more than life and that art had the power to transform the life it represented. 'How much *Faustus* contains of the atmosphere of my life!' Mann wrote in January 1946; 'A radical confession, at bottom. From the very beginning that has been the shattering thing about the book.'<sup>xxxi</sup>

At the time that *Faustus* was published, there was another commentary on Germany in the making and, like *Faustus*, it was being created amid the sunny palm trees and bougainvillea of California. But this response was more comic. When he was first stationed in Germany in 1945, Wilder had been expecting to make a documentary about the concentration camps. He sat through hour after hour of footage of piled up corpses and emaciated survivors and waited anxiously to see if he would recognize his mother or grandmother in any of the shots. At this stage he was determined to play his part in convincing the Germans

of their guilt. However, as his months in Germany went on it became clear that the American authorities were not in any hurry to use this renowned filmmaker to make films. He was given a series of menial tasks that left him determined to break free of the bureaucracy and make a film on his own. This became *A Foreign Affair* and was framed from the start as an entertainment film rather than a didactic documentary. As he put it in a memorandum, it was to be 'a very special love story, cleverly devised to help us sell a few ideological items'.<sup>xxxii</sup>

The film portrays a romance between an American soldier, Johnny, and a German singer, Erika (played by Wilder's old friend the anti-Nazi German actress Marlene Dietrich), who turns out to have been the lover of a Gestapo chief before the German defeat ushered in a new group of powerful men and she conveniently fell for Johnny. After Congress sends a group of spies to observe the behavior of the American army abroad, Johnny seduces Phoebe, a goody-goody American Congresswoman, in an effort to distract her from trailing Erika. The film is fundamentally ambivalent because it portrays both the Germans and the Americans as simultaneously likeable and corrupt and portrays both regimes as impossible flawed.

Wilder had not forgiven the Germans, who emerge as opportunistic Nazis. But he could not see the American occupiers as much better. At the start of the film, one of the visiting Congressmen objects controversially to the blatant propaganda being put forward by the Occupation: 'If you give a hungry man a loaf of bread, that's democracy. If you leave the wrapper on, it's imperialism.' In the summer of 1947, when the film was set, this was just what the Americans, as much as the Russians, were doing. And Wilder's GIs are no less corrupt than the Germans they are there to re-educate. They sell their morals and their possessions for sex with German women for whom they often have very little respect.

Johnny is attracted to Erika because she has been a Nazi, not in spite of it; their chemistry lends Nazism an erotic charge. 'How about a kiss now, you beast of Belsen,' he says to her in the original draft of the script, after he has brought her a tatty mattress as a present and she has spat a mouthful of toothpaste half-playfully in his face.<sup>xxxiii</sup> By the time the film had been completed, this had been replaced with the milder 'you gorgeous booby trap', but there was still no



mistaking the strange allure of her Nazi past. 'For fifteen years we haven't slept in Germany,' Erika grumbles, refusing to be grateful. 'No mattress will help you sleep. What you Germans need is a good conscience,' Johnny replies, taking on the line of his government. 'I have a good conscience, I have a new Führer now, you. *Heil* Johnny,' Erika says, raising her arm in a Nazi salute. 'You *heil* me once more and I'll knock your teeth in,' he warns, obviously aroused by her depravity. 'You'd bruise your lips,' she replies, and Johnny places his hands around her neck as he tells her that he ought to choke her a little and break her in two. 'Build a fire under you, you blonde witch.'

As Wilder and Dietrich both knew, war makes monsters of men. Johnny is to be forgiven his flirtation with Nazism. He informs his saccharine Congresswoman paramour that that he has raced at a hundred miles an hour through burning towns for five years and is unable to jam on the brakes and stop. And luckily Phoebe proves forgiving of Johnny. But despite Phoebe's redemptive powers, Erika remains the film's pulsating star. 'That's the kind of pastry makes you drool on your bib,' one GI says of her, and it is a view Wilder encourages. Dietrich is lovingly followed by the camera as she wends her way lazily around the Lorelei nightclub, casually drawing on the cigarettes of her male onlookers. What is more, Dietrich was allowed to wear the same dresses that she had worn as a USO singer, identifying herself to Americans as one of them. The film may end with Johnny going obediently home to the US with his efficient Iowan Congresswoman but there is no doubt that he will be considerably less interesting away from Erika. And her scenes took Wilder and his audiences back to his own cinematic past.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Höllander's songs, performed by Erika in the Lorelei nightclub, bring the spirit of 1920s Berlin to occupied postwar Germany, further complicating the viewer's relationship with the Germans. They imbue the ruins of Berlin with the tragedy, nonchalance and sultry eroticism of its Weimar roots, especially as Dietrich sings 'Falling in Love again', the English version of the Holländer song (*'Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuss auf Liebe eingestellt'*) that had become her theme tune in *Der blaue Engel* (*The Blue Angel*), the 1930 film that had made her name. What is more, Höllander himself plays the piano at the Lorelei; at one stage Dietrich removes a cigarette from Johnny's mouth to place it in his. It is as though he has

been sitting at the piano in a seedy Berlin basement since the time of *Der blaue Engel*, when he played an almost identical part. Like Spender and like Mann, Wilder was nostalgic for the lost Germany of his own youth: for a German culture that all three saw as containing the seeds of Nazism but that they could not revoke because they remained aware that it had shaped them.

If Wilder allied himself with the Germans through his nostalgia for Weimar culture, he also provided the Americans with the most vivid depiction most of them would have seen of the wreckage of Berlin. How could they not feel sorry for the Germans after seeing aerial footage of street after street of hollowed out facades? Wry asides like ‘that pile of stone over there was the Adlon hotel just after the 8<sup>th</sup> air force checked in for the weekend’ serve to remind us of the casualness with which these buildings were destroyed. Johnny asks Phoebe if she really wants the Americans ‘to stand there on the blackened rubble of what used to be a corner of what used to be a street with an open sample case of assorted freedoms waving the flag and giving out the bill of rights’. How could he not accept Erika’s defence of her own will to survive? She has been bombed out a dozen times; everything has caved in and been pulled out from under her – ‘my country, my possessions, my beliefs’; she has spent months in air-raid shelters crammed in with hundreds of other people; she has endured the arrival of the Red Army. Surely it is not the place of the Americans to come in now and tell her that she has been wrong to keep going. The rubble she inhabits makes this point more eloquently than either she or Johnny can.

By dwelling so luxuriantly on these ruins, Wilder showed that part of his heart had remained in Germany. The destruction might be necessary but it was devastating nonetheless. However distant they felt from the Germans who remained in Germany, neither Wilder nor Mann could represent Germany without moments of revelatory intimacy. And though they could not forgive the Germans for their crimes, neither could they forgive their new compatriots for the ruin they had wrought in the cities of their youth. Whether they intended it or not, Wilder and Dietrich had used their outsider perspective to create a form of rubble art that enabled audiences to sympathize with the Germans they still despised, mobilizing culture to create tolerance.<sup>xxxv</sup>

## DESPAIR

Torn between lamenting the destruction of Germany and blaming the Germans for their ruin, Mann turned to tragedy and Wilder to comedy, while Spender found himself engulfed in nausea and nightmare and Gellhorn sent Levy's jeep speeding to destruction, reeling in helplessness before a maimed and tormented world. Werner Sollors has suggested that for those who witnessed the ruins in postwar Germany, these years were characterized by the 'temptation of despair'. Certainly this was the case for Klaus Mann.

If completed, Klaus Mann's unfinished 1949 novel *The Last Day* would have joined *Doktor Faustus* as another ambitious, ambivalent and ultimately tragic novel in the genre of 'outsider rubble literature', though the rubble depicted is more mental than physical despite the partial German setting. It is essentially an investigation into whether German despair is inevitably world despair; whether German guilt is a universal human condition and whether suicide is the only possible response. In its simplest form, the novel contrasts the experiences of an 'inner' and an 'outer' emigrant, alternating the point of view of two German writers in East Berlin and New York who resent the domineering intellectual control imposed by the Soviet Union and the US respectively. Albert is a cultural official in East Germany who is too idealistic for the new Soviet-controlled Germany. Julian is a German exile living in New York who can never forget that he shares the guilt of his race and who feels disillusioned by Truman's America. An American official plays a fateful part in the lives of both men, turning Albert into an outsider even as he remains an insider in Germany and derailing Julian's position as an insider in America by drawing attention to his more European convictions. In Berlin, he offers Albert the chance to defect to West Germany 'without any obligations'; in New York, he writes to Julian, denouncing him as a communist.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Julian wonders about publishing a manifesto in a communist newspaper but he is aware that he is no more comfortable with communism than he is with American capitalism. He becomes convinced that despair itself can be a form of protest and decides to commit suicide. The novel ends with the deaths of both

men. Albert, about to escape to the West, is betrayed by his wife and arrested by Russian officers who shoot him when he tries to escape ('dirt and blood. A messy agony') while Julian kills himself, attempting to slash his wrists in the bathtub and then jumping naked from the window (ch. 18).

The scenes Klaus Mann sketched in the most detail are those depicting Julian's decline. Julian is enthused by the 'sudden certainty' that he wants to die. Absolute despair seems to him to have tremendous power – 'a dynamic impact'; it can be made into 'an argument of irresistible persuasiveness' because 'a man who has given up hope becomes invincible'. He thinks about founding a 'League of the Desperate Ones', a 'Suicide Club'. Other members already include 'the Austrian humanist who took his life in Brazil' (Stefan Zweig) and 'the English novelist and *femme de lettres* who drowned herself' (Virginia Woolf). His death will be a form of protest motivating the intellectual elite all over the world to join his organization. Immediately, Julian worries that these 'political' motives for suicide may be an artificial 'rationalization' when in fact the will to death is 'primary, elementary'. But then he decides that it is reasonable to 'turn one's delusions into something constructive'; to sublimate the death instinct. 'I die in an exemplary manner: my death is a signal, a challenge, an appeal' (ch. 15).

In Julian's death, Klaus Mann relived in gruesome, almost comical detail the horrors of a suicide attempt he himself had made the previous year. Julian drinks whiskey and clambers naked into the bath. He starts cutting his wrists with the razor blade and finds that 'the taste of death is bitter... my purple bath, my blood bath'. The water reddens as he tries his right wrist and then, more successfully, his left. But the vein contracts and the blood stops. He climbs out of the bathtub and rushes through the room, dripping with blood and water as he fumbles to open the window (ch. 19).

Klaus Mann told a friend that he was confronting 'the issue of suicide' in his novel because it was 'more tedious and more painful but somehow more honourable than actually doing it'.<sup>xxxvii</sup> In May 1949 he actually did it, killing himself in Cannes. Curtailed by its author's death, *The Last Day* stands in brilliant but uneasy counterpoint to the other works considered here. Klaus Mann did not have time to seek the moments of redemption sought by Spender, nor to turn the situation in Germany into the rich tragedy wrought by Thomas Mann.

The mood of Klaus Mann's novel is more akin to the hopelessness of *Point of No Return* than to the mood of *European Witness* or *Doctor Faustus*. Julian's act resembles Jacob Levy's dual act of murder and suicide in its impotence, even if he has the time and the intellect to imbue it with larger philosophical implications. Both acts are a response to a hopelessness that seems to make the very notion of reconstruction impossible; that makes a mockery of the regimes who brought Gellhorn and Mann to Germany.

Both Gellhorn and Klaus Mann subscribed to Spender's pessimistic view that the sermons in the stones of the German ruins preached nihilism. In the landscape of these novels, the notion that culture might transform this would seem absurd. However, whatever his doubts about the Occupation, Spender could still believe in the transformative power of culture, as could Billy Wilder and Thomas Mann. Though it seemed unlikely that such a transformation was going to occur under the auspices of the Allies, and though they made the inclusion of culture in the reconstruction programme seem absurd, they nonetheless collectively created a genre that began to show how the rubble scattered through Germany might be capable of redemption and how art might play its part in this process. *European Witness* pledges its faith in a pan-European cultural revival to ensure peace, while *A Foreign Affair* places its hopes in the ability of film to induce laughter that will enable tolerance. *Doctor Faustus* evinces a troubled but sustained belief in the redemptive power of great art.

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<sup>i</sup> Stephen Spender, *European Witness: Impressions of Germany in 1945* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1946), pp. 23-24. Subsequent references to this work will be given in the main body of the article.

<sup>ii</sup> For this and other reminiscences about Germany in the late 1920s, Stephen Spender, 'September Journal', *Horizon*, Vol. I, No. 2, February 1940, pp. 102-121, Vol. I, No. 3, March 1940, pp. 211-224, Vol. I, No. 5, May 1940, pp. 356-363.

<sup>iii</sup> Other works that could be included here are W.H. Auden's allegorical poem 'Memorial for the City', Hans Habe's novels *Walk in Darkness* and *Off Limits*, Lee Miller's obliquely surrealist German photographs, Zelda Popkin's novel *Small Victory*, Alan Ross's poetry collection *The*

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*Derelict Day*, William Gardner Smith's novel *Last of the Conquerors* and Rebecca West's strangely personal account of her time in Nuremberg 'Greenhouse with Cyclamens'.

- iv Poll cited in Tony Judt, *Postwar, A History of Europe since 1945* (Vintage, 2010), p. 272.
- v 'The victors who': Erich Kästner, Diary (rewritten for publication), 8 May 1945, cited in Werner Sollors, *The Temptation of Despair* ((Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 32.
- vi Martha Gellhorn, 'The Paths of Glory', *Collier's*, 9 Nov 1946, p. 74.
- vii Martha Gellhorn, *Point of No Return* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 228. Subsequent references to this work will be given in the main body of the article.
- viii Martha Gellhorn to Hortense Flexner, cited in in Caroline Moorehead, *Martha Gellhorn: A Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003), p. 283.
- ix Thomas Mann, 'Germany and the Germans', *Thomas Mann's Addresses delivered at the Library of Congress 1942-1949*, (Washington DC: Library of Congress, 1963) pp. 47-66.
- x For 'inner emigrants', see Stephen Brockmann *German Literary Culture at the Zero Hour* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2004), pp. 95-100.
- xi Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: The First Part of the Tragedy*, trans. by David Constantine (Penguin, 2005), p. 57. 'Werd ich zum Augenblicke sagen: Verweile doch! Du bist so schön!' Johann Wolfgang Goethe, 'Faust, eine Tragödie', *Faust*, (Birkhäuser Basel, 1944), p. 184. Goethe's Faust does continue to experience pleasure (notably sexual pleasure with Gretchen and other women) but this is transient; he has made a bargain with Mephistopheles that if he ever experiences the kind of transcendent happiness that makes him long for a particular moment to continue, the Devil will be in possession of his soul.
- xii Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend*, trans. John E. Woods (Vintage International, 1999), p. 265. Subsequent references to these works will be given in the main body of the article. 'Ist etwa die Kälte bei dir nicht vorgebildet', Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus: Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn erzählt von einem Freunde* (S. Fischer Verlag, 1965), p. 332.
- xiii Other obvious models for Leverkühn are Adorno and Schoenberg. See Ehrhard Bahr, *Weimar on the Pacific: German Exile Culture in Los Angeles and the Crisis of Modernism* (University of California Press, 2007) for a discussion of Mann's influences.
- xiv 'Dein Leben soll kalt sein', p. 332.
- xv 'Ich habe gefunden... es soll nicht sein' "was man das Menschliche nennt... Es wird zurückgenommen', p. 634.
- xvi 'leicht orgiastische', p. 115
- xvii 'eine leises Grauen erweckende Verbindung', p. 11.
- xviii 'Geisterwelt', p. 16.
- xix 'die Zeit selber [...] wirst du durchbrechen und dich der Barbarei erdreisten', p. 324.
- xx 'in einem großen Volkskrieg [...] das Mittel sehen zum Durchbruch in eine Lebensform, in der Staat und Kultur eines sein würden', p. 400.
- xxi 'die Zerstörung [...], die zum Himmel schreien würde, wenn nicht wir Schuldbeladenen es wären, die sie erleiden', p. 231.
- xxii Thomas Mann, 9 Feb 1945, 25 Feb 1945, 3 April 1945, 4 April 1945, *Tagebücher*, ed. by Peter de Mendelssohn and Inge Jens (Berlin: S. Fischer, 1977) (my translation): 'Schauerlich die Agonie von Berlin. Keine Kohle, keine Elektrizität', 'schweres Bombardement Deutschlands', 'Die Städte fallen wie reife Pflaumen', 'Das Mißraten des Romans kann wohl keinem Zweifel mehr unterliegen.'
- xxiii 'Unterdessen wächst der Schrecken der fast täglichen Luftangriffe auf unsere wohlumgürtete Festung Europa ins Überdimensionale [...] immer weitere unserer Städte sinken in Trümmer', p. 335.
- xxiv 'und meide den Anblick unseres gräßlich zugerichteten München [...] der aus leeren Augenhöhlen blickenden Fassaden, die das hinter ihnen gähnende Nichts verstellen', p. 600.
- xxv 'die entnervten Demokratien diese furchtbaren Mittel sogar zu benutzen wissen', 'ein deutsches Prärogativ', p. 336.
- xxvi 'so daß wir gar nicht umhinkönnen, sie mehr zu fürchten als alles auf der Welt', p. 45.

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xxvii 'eine gewisse Genugtuung [...] über unseren immer regen Erfindungsgeist', 'und, wie es scheint, der Welt unerträgliche Wirklichkeit eines deutschen Europas', p. 229.

xxviii 'eine seelische Lage [...], die ihm meiner Überzeugung nach schwerer fällt als jedem anderen, und es sich selber heillos entfremdet', p. 46.

xxix Thomas Mann to Paul Amann, cited in Mark W. Clark, *Beyond Catastrophe: German Intellectuals and Cultural Renewal after World War II, 1945–1955* (Lexington Books, 2006), p. 101. Clark notes that through Zeitblom Mann was ironising the German tendency to see their conflicts of conscience as unusually noble and profound. For a discussion of the novel's self-reflexivity and Zeitblom's unreliability as a narrator see Martin Swales, 'The over-representations of history? Reflections on Thomas Mann's Doktor Faustus' in Mary Fulbrook and Martin Swales (eds.), *Representing the German Nation* (Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 77–90.

xxx 'von mächtig tragischer Seele', 'unsere Liebe gehört dem Schicksal...sei es auch der den Himmel mit Götterdämmerungsroße entzündende Untergang', p. 232.

xxxi Thomas Mann, 1 Jan 1946, *Tagebücher*: 'Wieviel enthält der 'Faustus' von meiner Lebensstimmung. Es war von Anfang an das Aufregende an dem Buch. Im Grunde ein radikales Bekenntnis'.

xxxii Memorandum for the United States Information Control Division on the subject of 'Propaganda through Entertainment', 16 Aug 1945, in Ralph Willett, *The Americanization of Germany, 1945–1949* (Routledge, 1988), p. 42.

xxxiii For a detailed dating of Wilder's scenario, see Sollors, *The Temptation of Despair*, p. 249.

xxxiv For Wilder's nostalgia for Weimar cinema, see Gerd Gemünden, 'In the ruins of Berlin: A Foreign Affair', in *German Post-war Films: Life and Love in the Ruins*, ed. by Wilfried Wilms and William Rasch (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 109–24.

xxxv See Sollors, *The Temptation of Despair* for a discussion of Wilder's sympathy towards postwar Germany. By analyzing several of Wilder's drafts of the screenplay, Sollors argues that the changes in the script parallel the change in American attitudes towards Germany from a punitive posture to a collaborative one (p. 253).

xxxvi Klaus Mann, *The Last Day*, Manuscript, chapter 10, Klaus Mann Archive, Monacensia Literaturarchiv. Subsequent chapter references to this work will be given in the main body of the article.

xxxvii Cited in Andrea Weiss, *In the Shadow of the Magic Mountain: The Erika and Klaus Mann Story* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 236